

Title: High Island Blues: the sport of birding in the novels of Ann Cleeves

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Nothing could have been simpler than "birdwatching" An activity by that name would have required nothing more than one person, alone, watching birds, any birds ...

But in the early 1970s, we were not birdwatching. We were birding, and that made all the difference.... We became a community of birders, with the complications that human societies always have; and although it was the birds that had brought us together, our story became a human story after all.

Kenn Kaufman, *Kingbird Highway* (xi)

In *Kingbird Highway*, Kenn Kaufman's fine book describing his 1973 pursuit of Ted Parker's record for the most species of birds, 626, recorded in the U.S. in one calendar year (69), Kaufman defines the "sport of birding" (xi) as the attempt "to seek, to discover, to chase, to learn, to find as many different kinds of birds as possible--and, in friendly competition, to try to find more of them than the next birder" (xi). Out of this competitive pursuit has grown an amazing number of lists annually reported in the American Birding Association's Supplement to Birding, the "Big Day Report and List Report," which ranks world, state and annual totals for members of the ABA, as well as "Champion Big Day Records" for each U.S. state (even records by month (1)), for each Canadian province and for many countries in the world.

The sport of birding, competitively identifying birds via listing and big days, as opposed to birdwatching, casually observing birds in their environment, is treated as a sport in the mystery novels of several authors (2), including J. S. Borthwick (3), Christine Coff (4), and Ann Cleeves. Cleeves especially focuses on birding as a sport in her birding mysteries, particularly, *A Bird in the Hand* (1986) and *High Island Blues* (1996) (5). Birding's competitive nature is central to *High Island Blues*, which pivots on a "bird-race," as British term it, or birdathon (6), a competition between teams to identify the most species of birds in a fixed time period, often 24 hours, within a specific geographic boundary. Because of her knowledge of the subject and because she writes so well about the birding experience, Ann Cleeves' novels seem to me an ideal vehicle for examining the sport of birding as it is portrayed in literature.

Serious birders must be able to know their quarry, able to identify a species by sight and sound, able to anticipate where a species might occur at a given time (month, day, hour of day) and place (habitat), and able to pursue that species wherever it might be. I, for one, have hiked 8 miles round trip into the Sonoran desert of Southeast Arizona, departing at 5:00 a.m., in order to see and hear the elusive Five-Striped Sparrow, which only breeds in two canyons on the border between Mexico and Arizona. Of course, if I hadn't gone to Arizona early in the sparrow's breeding season, while it still called territorially, my chances of finding the species would have been dramatically reduced. This was the dilemma faced on a large scale by Kaufman in 1973 when he wiped out Ted Parker's U.S. record by 43 for a total of 666 species, except that Kaufman ended up finishing second that year to fellow birder Floyd Murdoch (Kaufman 315). As with other nature sports, such as fishing and hunting, the birder's knowledge of factors such as habitat, weather conditions, and the bird's available food supplies, is vital to the ability to find vagrant or rare species. As Santiago, in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), adjusts his position in the current when he sees a "man-of-war bird" has "got something" (43), so must the birder be aware of signs in the environment as clues to his/her quarry. If Paul MacLean, in *A River Runs Through It* (1976), "need[s] three more years before [he] can think like a fish" (110), the birder must put in many years before s/he can think like a bird. The extreme lengths some birders have gone to in recording rare species is quite amazing. In 1996, one group of birders calculated where birds swept inland by Hurricane Fran would occur on the outflow side and pursued them in the midst of the storm. As Brian Sullivan describes in his article "Chasing Hurricane Fran,"

Upon our first look at Kerr Reservoir it appeared like a furious ocean, the the water grayish brown and boiling white with intensity. Waves slammed into the base of the dam on which we positioned our car. Spray from each blast blew up over the top some 50 feet in the air, and covered our windshield repeatedly. (83)

Yet Sullivan and his companions were rewarded for their efforts, seeing incredible pelagic species at a lake over 100 miles inland from the Atlantic Ocean, including rare terns, petrels, shearwaters and jaegers (7).

Ann Cleeves' detective, retired Home Office investigator George Palmer-Jones, typically solves murders linked to the core of competitive birders, or "twitchers," who pursue rare sightings of species throughout Britain, endeavoring to improve their life, county and annual bird lists. These birders, like Tom French in *A Bird in the Hand* (1986), want "the excitement and the glory of being the first to see a rarity" (4). In spite of such dreams of glory, birders generally feel compelled to follow the rules or ethics of birding, whether outlined in the American Birding Association's code of ethics (8), published regularly in its *Birding* magazine, the Royal Society for the

Protection of Bird's code (9) or local sanctuary regulations, such as not playing bird tapes in SE Arizona to avoid undue pressure on rare breeding species there (Elegant Trogon or Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, for example).

In High Island Blues, bird guide Rob Earl unwittingly makes himself prime suspect in the murder of fellow birder Mick Ferguson when he breaks local nature preserve rules at High Island, Texas, by leaving the trail and crossing boundary ropes in pursuit of a "lifer," Swainson's Warbler:

Rob looked up the trail both ways. He was supposed to be a responsible tour leader, and if he was going to break the rules of the sanctuary he didn't want anyone to see him. The trail was empty, but he stayed where he was and made a "pshhing" sound. Again he caught a brief glimpse of the warbler, but it was an untickable view. It flew farther away from the trail and into the underbrush. (47)

Here, Rob tries to play by the rules by staying on the path. Though some purists consider flushing a bird by make pshhing noises improper, it is normally acceptable. But the glimpse he gets is "untickable"; in other words, he hasn't seen the right combination of field marks--eyebrow stripe, leg color, shape of bill, and so on--to claim the bird for his life list. Rob prides himself on his birding skills too much to become a "stringer" and claim a bird because it "might be a rarity" (Bird in the Hand 149).

But his pursuit of the possible Swainson's leads to his breaking local rules by crossing the "boundary" rope and "kicking at the bushes to flush the bird into the open, looking around to make sure that no one could see him" (47). Though the bird is now tickable, the price he pays is high--he can't share the immediate experience with birders nearby and claim "the excitement and glow of being the first" to see a rarity, a la Tom French in *A Bird in the Hand*. Instead, Rob is checking his back to make sure no one saw him cheat! When two older birders on his tour do appear on the path, Rob is reduced to crawling in the muddy underbrush to avoid being seen "off limits" (49). But though they assume he's practicing some mysterious "field craft" (49) to get his bird, Rob's discovery soon after of Mick Ferguson's dead body nearby places him immediately high on the suspect list. Somewhat ironically, Mick was clubbed with one of the trail boundary stakes and then stabbed with a wood chisel used to carve wooden birds (253), fairly unusual murder weapons to say the least. Rather than a baseball bat or hockey stick, the standard blunt instrument in Cleeves's birding mysteries is a spotting scope, the weapon of choice in both *A Bird in the Hand* and *Sea Fever* (1991). In Borthwick's *Hook-Billed Kites*, a birder is even strangled with his own binoculars (79).

The competitive aspect of birding alluded to by Kaufman in his definition of birding as a sport, "in friendly competition, to try to find more of them than the next birder," is sometimes the not-so-friendly motive for murder. Such is the motive of Adam Anderson in *A Bird in the Hand*, when he discovers Tom French has found the Bimaculated Lark when, to a disturbed Adam, this should have been his bird to find because he had correctly assessed the weather conditions, strong southerly wind flow and fog-banked shoreline, and gone inland to find a rare bird. As Molly Palmer-Jones, wife and Watson to George Palmer-Jones's Holmes, explains, "Birdwatching was the only thing that Adam was good at. ... The day of Tom's death [Adam] had gone to Rushy convinced that he was going to see a rare bird, something so rare that it would make him famous" (212). Adam even "believed implicitly that he was meant to find the bird, and that Tom French had in some way tricked or betrayed him by getting there first" (212). To make matters worse, Tom then spoke condescendingly to Adam, as if Adam "knew nothing about birds" (212). Molly's theory is that: "If Tom had let him play a part in it, had consulted him about the bird and shared it with him, perhaps Adam would never have lost control" (212). Typically, rarities are shared among birders, in pre-cyber days, via phone trees or rare bird alert message machines, now via birding listservs, cell phone, or even, in some heavily-birded areas, by FRS radio. In Rob Earl's "cheating" to nab a Swainson's Warbler and in Adam Anderson's obsessive desire to be "famous" for finding rare birds, Cleaves cleverly shows the danger for birders when they lose that sense of community, of sharing experiences with others.

The rush to see rarities on hearing news of "a good bird," as one of my friends describes rarities, is certainly both physical and mental, and a planted rumor of a good bird even helps catch the murderer in *A Bird in the Hand*. But *High Island Blues*, the last and best of the Cleaves birding novels, focuses well on both the "community of birders" (Kaufman xi) and on the competitive nature of birding, the Big Day and birdathon. Most of the novel is set at a Texas spring migration "hot spot," High Island, a point on the east coast of Texas which is an early landfall for migrants crossing the Caribbean. Given the right weather conditions, it can also be the site of incredible "fallouts," when tired birds will seem to drip from the trees. It is in the midst of one of these fallouts that Mick Ferguson is murdered. Yet it also is a moment when the birders in the novel are communing with nature and with each other: "There were Dutch birders and Swedish birders and birders from all over the States. But most of all there were British birders and Rob waved to people he had last seen at Cley, in Norfolk, or shared a beer with in the observatory on Fair Isle" (41). As people scatter to the call of "Cerulean Warbler" (43) and other rarities in the local sanctuary, Rob begins his fated search for Swainson's Warbler.

With nice pacing the novel's mystery climaxes in the Bolivar Birdathon. A local hotel, the Oaklands, has entered a team composed of four Brits, including Rob Earl, George Palmer-Jones, and, ironically, the murderer of Mick Ferguson, who has now replaced Mick on the team! Following standard Big Day rules, they must each independently identify any species found on the count day (potentially a midnight-midnight jaunt). The area of the count is Texas's Bolivar Peninsula. They have scouted for ideal habitat, for already breeding target species, and they have spent time planning their "day" to maximize species variety. Big Days are certainly not for birdwatchers, who as Kaufman argues, require "nothing more than one person, alone, watching birds, any birds," for a team of at least two is mandated by the rules, and rarely does one have time to study the birds identified on a Big Day at length, once they've been identified to species. A Kansas Big Day would invariably begin with woodland birding, but for a count by the sea, it's not surprising the Oaklands team begins at Bolivar Ferry:

Then the sun shone and they could start the race properly. George took notes and counted up the running total. Adult Franklin's gull going north. Brown pelican. And just as they had decided they had ticked off everything they could expect to see at the ferry, there was a juvenile magnificent frigate bird. Huge. A seven-foot wingspan and a forked swallow's tail. Ferocious, like some throwback from Jurassic times, Oliver said. It had been blown from the Caribbean by three days of storm. No one could have predicted it.

That set the tone of the day. It was like a dream. Wherever they went they saw all the species they expected to get, and more. George had never known a day's birding like it. The birds Rob had staked out on his day of planning were waiting for them. The female [w]illet was still displaying on the post by the side of the road leading to the Flats. A solitary sandpiper was still in the ditch. As the day wore on and their score increased they stopped being surprised by their luck and took it for granted. When they bumped into competing teams who complained about birds they had missed, they had to control their glee. (247-248)

The day's game plan works for the Oaklands team, finding unpredictable birds like the frigate bird but they don't falter in identifying it ("seven-foot wingspan," "forked swallow's tail").

That bird they stop long enough to watch and comment on, "some throwback from Jurassic times." In the end it's a "dream" day when they stop being "surprised by their luck" and take "it for granted" as "their score" increases. Even when George Palmer-Jones hesitates on the ethics of dragging a field (with a rope) to flush rails because, at first, he feels uncomfortable helping--"George found the situation ridiculous. What was he doing here, up to his ankles in mud? These were boys' games and he should have grown out of them" (249)--when they flush a Yellow Rail, he feels "a rash of

adrenaline" and yells "with the rest of them. He was still just as much a boy as they were" (249). Again in this scene, Cleeves emphasizes birding as a sporting "game."

Like the title game in any sports novel, this is one the Oaklands team will never forget. In fact, Cleeves emphasizes its sporting analogy in her final description of the team's day. Detective George may be anxious about the murderer he's about to expose, but "[t]he others walked ahead of him into the house, their arms round each other's shoulders, swaying like drunken football fans after an away win" (251). When the murderer is shot by the local sheriff while he threatens Mick Ferguson's widow and George attempts to intervene, the other two members of the victorious Birdathon team don't even notice, they're celebrating so hard: "In the distance they heard drunken singing. 'Rule Britannia' and 'Land of Hope and Glow.' Rob and Oliver were celebrating" (261) the British team's victory. Naturally, the reason for Mick's murder revolves around his schoolboy days competing for a team in the "Devon Trust Bird Race" (248), for he was responsible for the death of the daughter of the Race organizer, a daughter who used to carve birds out of wood with the same chisel found in Mick Ferguson's back!

In opening *Kingbird Highway*, Ken Kaufman acknowledges that out of friendly competition grew "a community of birders, with the complications that human societies always have; and although it was the birds that had brought us together, our story became a human story after all" (xi). Cleeves seems particularly adept at portraying such a "community of birders," not living in a single village like St. Mary Mead, the haunt of Agatha Christie's Miss Marple, a birdwatcher (10), by the way. These birders check the same hot spots in the right season, chase the same rarities, frequent the same cafes and hotels, and they ostensibly follow the same rules of conduct. But murder can arise out of overzealous competition--"Tom French had in some way tricked or betrayed him by getting there first"--or it can arise from the oldest of human motives, revenge, making it, as Kaufman suggests, "a human story after all."

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Notes

(1.) In 1999, for example, the annual list reported that the Kansas state record for April, which I had helped set at 158 species in 1990, had fallen to another birding team which garnered 164 in, according to the group's compiler "a rather subdued effort." (The 1999 Big Day Report and the 1999 List Report, Supplement to *Birding*, XXXII:3: 23), disheartening considering my team had driven close to 500 miles and birded for some 20 hours to set the now-broken record.

(2.) Two others I'm aware of are Lydia Adamson, *Beware the Tufted Duck* (1996) and *Beware the Butcher Bird* (1997), and Donna Andrews, *Murder with Puffins* (2000), among others. Alison Gordon's *Prairie Hardball* (1997), whose detective, sports journalist Kate Henry lives with a birding police sergeant, also refers to birding as a sport occasionally.

(3.) J.S. Borthwick, *The Case of the Hook-Billed Kites* (New York: St. Martin's, 1982).

(4.) Christine Goff, *A Rant of Ravens* (2000), *Death of a Songbird* (2001), and *A Nest in the Ashes* (2002).

(5.) Other birding mysteries by Ann Cleeves are *Come Death and High Water* (1987), *A Prey to Murder* (1989), *Murder in Paradise* (1989), *Sea Fever* (1991), *Another Man's Poison* (1993), and *The Mill on the Shore* (1994). A short story, "Owl Wars," just recently appeared in *Crime on the Move* (2005), an anthology edited by Martin Edwards.

(6.) The best known birdathon in the U.S. is the aptly-named "World Series of Birding," which has the whole state of New Jersey as its playing ground.

(7.) Among the rarities were: Herald's Petrel, Fea's Petrel, Sabine's Gull, Black-Capped Petrel, and Parasitic Jaeger (83-86).

(8.) e.g., "1 (b) To avoid stressing birds or exposing them to danger, exercise restraint and caution during observation, photography, sound recording, or filming." and "I(d) Stay on roads, trails, and paths where they exist; otherwise keep habitat disturbance to a minimum," <http://www.americanbirding.org/abaethics.htm>.

(9.) e.g., "Avoid disturbing birds and their habitats--the birds' interests should always come first," <http://www.rspb.org.uk/birds/birdwatching/code/index.asp>.

(10.) In *A Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), for example, Miss Marple reports having noticed several characters near to a murder site when she was observing a "golden-crested wren" (61) through her binoculars.

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